

August 1999

Teacher Preparation and Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The 1993 Washington Education Reform Act set high expectations and high stakes for improving student learning. Washington, like most other states, has relied on three strategies to implement education reform:

- **Statewide standards:** performance goals for students have been defined;
- **Statewide performance assessment:** students are tested in 4th, 7th, and 10th grades; and
- **Accountability:** students who do not achieve the 10th grade certificate of mastery will not receive their high school diplomas; school districts are responsible for improving student learning.

The high stakes associated with education reform raise questions about how students are being taught. Teachers are charged with helping students meet the state's academic standards. There is no clear evidence that current teachers are poorly prepared or unqualified, but the state has established very high expectations for student learning. Is the state ensuring that teachers have the knowledge and skills to help students meet the new academic standards?

In the spring of 1998, the Board of Directors for the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) directed staff to undertake a study of teacher quality in light of the high stakes of education reform.

Institute Study: Teacher Quality and Three Early Stages of a Teacher's Career

The Institute examined three teacher preparation and development programs covering the early stages of a teacher's career:

- Pre-service Teacher Preparation (Residency Certificate)
- Beginning Teacher Assistance
- Professional Certification

The Institute obtained information on the three programs through case studies, surveys, and interviews. All new teachers who were hired by public schools between 1996 and 1998 were sent written surveys along with all public school principals. We also reviewed the history of teacher preparation and development in Washington and research literature on teacher quality, analyzed data on certification and employment of teachers in Washington's public schools, and summarized activities related to teacher quality in other states.

State Policies to Assure Teacher Quality

Washington State. Many different entities are involved in overseeing policies for the various stages of a teacher's career. These entities include the legislature, the State Board of Education (SBE), universities, professional associations, school districts, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). Because there are so many participants, it can be difficult to develop a consensus about common principles to guide policies for teacher preparation and development. Washington is a state with a strong tradition for maintaining accountability at the local level through the colleges of education and local school districts.

State Policy Tools to Influence Teacher Quality. Across the country, education reform has generated new interest in teacher quality. States rely on a number of policy tools to influence teacher quality, including standards for knowledge and skills, statewide assessments or tests, accountability for teacher preparation, beginning teacher assistance, recruitment and retention, alternative certification, teacher evaluation, teacher professional development, and teacher salaries. With the exception of statewide assessments, Washington has used all these policy tools, although not all are currently in use statewide, such as minority recruitment and alternative certification.

Research. Educational research has tried to identify indicators of teacher quality that have an impact on student achievement. Most studies have mixed findings regarding the impact of a teacher's education degree level, subject matter major, length of experience, or teacher performance on tests. However, recent studies in Tennessee and Texas found that an effective teacher can make a difference on test scores of individual students.

The strategies to improve student learning are statewide standards, statewide performance assessments, and accountability. These strategies could also be used in Washington for teacher preparation and development in order to encourage effective teaching.

Pre-service Teacher Preparation (Residency Certificate)

In 1997-98, SBE revised the standards and subject matter endorsements for candidates in teacher preparation programs. These changes are being phased-in over a three-year period. The major premise in the new standards is that teacher candidates must show they can demonstrate a positive impact on student learning. Teacher preparation programs have until August 2000 to submit their revised programs for SBE approval under the new standards.

The Institute found that the 22 teacher preparation programs in Washington are changing to meet the challenges of education reform. They have incorporated state learning goals into class work, and they have expanded field experiences. Overall, 60 percent of beginning teachers and principals report teacher preparation programs met or exceeded their expectations in preparing teachers for today's classrooms.

Regarding teacher candidates and recent graduates, the Institute found:

- The average grade point average (GPA) in 1998 of undergraduates entering teacher preparation programs is higher than the average GPA of all undergraduates at public institutions.
- Eighty-eight percent of program graduates in Washington State in 1996-97 went to work as teachers or substitutes.
- Twenty-seven percent of the new teachers reported teaching outside their endorsement area part of the time.

However, the Institute also found that the basic skills requirements set by the legislature for entry into teacher preparation programs are broad enough for almost anyone to pass. It is unclear whether the basic skills tests or proficiencies currently used for admission to teacher preparation programs are adequate to test the basic skills required for all students under Washington's Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs). There are no statewide assessments to determine whether teacher candidates meet the standards for a residency certificate. Over 75 percent of principals and new teachers surveyed by the Institute favored testing candidates for basic skills, subject matter, and pedagogy.

Some challenges remain for teacher preparation programs:

- Improving instructional strategies for at-risk and special needs students;
- Using a variety of assessment techniques to monitor student progress;
- Finding and supporting high quality student teacher placements; and
- Measuring positive impact on student learning.

There is no clear process for how SBE would determine that a teacher preparation program is out of compliance with the new state standards for program approval.

Increased consistency across teacher preparation programs is needed to ensure teacher candidates meet common minimum levels of performance.

Beginning Teacher Assistance

Parents and the public have the same expectations for teachers regardless of how long they have been teaching. Research shows that beginning teachers need support to prevent burnout from stress and assistance with basic teaching skills to become more effective teachers. Washington has provided state funds for mentors, training, and release time for observations since 1985 through the Teacher Assistance Program (TAP).

The Institute found that for 1997-98, state TAP funds covered 80 percent of first-year teachers. Although the 1999 Legislature more than doubled the appropriation for the TAP program, the increased funding for 1999-2001 may still not reach all new teachers because state funds are distributed before all teachers are hired. School district programs, mentors, and training tend to focus on issues of emotional support and basic teaching skills for first-year teachers. Half the beginning teachers and three-quarters of the principals surveyed by the Institute said these programs made a difference in helping new teachers get through their first year.

However, the Institute also found that principals and beginning teachers were less positive about whether assistance programs made a difference in improving specific knowledge and skills, such as classroom management or incorporating the state's learning standards into curriculum and lesson plans. Most assistance programs rely on mentors with full-time teaching loads, and arranging time to work specifically on building knowledge and skills of new teachers can be difficult. Beginning teachers report limited opportunity for mentors to observe them teach. The state has not set expectations for what assistance programs are intended to accomplish. Reports from school districts, principals, and beginning teachers are mixed on whether such expectations are set locally.

The state beginning teacher assistance program has not been changed to reflect increased expectations for improved student learning under education reform.

Professional Certification

SBE has changed requirements for ongoing certification of teachers from input-driven (45 quarter college credits and one year of experience) to performance-based (demonstration of knowledge and skills and positive impact on student learning). Teachers graduating after August 2000, and having two years of experience, will have to enroll in a program developed collaboratively by a university and school districts to obtain a professional certificate. Certificate programs have been pilot-tested since 1997 with 75 teachers.

The Institute found that the pilot projects focused on practical knowledge and skills teachers could readily apply in their classrooms to improve student learning. Active involvement of both universities and school districts in the projects appeared to be a main factor in maintaining this practical focus. The course work in the pilot projects was different from course work current teachers typically take for continuing certification.

However, the Institute also found that the collaboration between universities and school districts in the pilot projects is not feasible or affordable on a statewide basis for the more than 1,500 candidates expected to enroll annually. The level of performance from candidates in the pilot projects may be too rigorous to expect from all teachers. It is not clear how SBE will determine that a program's candidates have met the standards for professional certification in a consistent and fair way. It is also not clear, based on the pilot projects, how certificate programs will deal with ensuring access, enrolling teachers who have advanced degrees and experience, or providing mentoring and assistance to candidates.

The professional certificate is not ready for statewide implementation. Increased oversight is needed to ensure candidates demonstrate common minimum levels of performance. Alternatively, the state could consider developing a state-administered assessment of teacher performance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In Washington, reliance on statewide standards, statewide performance assessments, and clear accountability for assuring teacher quality varies depending on the stage of teacher preparation and development. There are no consistent statewide standards for what teachers should know and be able to do that address each stage of a teacher's career. No statewide assessments measure the knowledge, skills, and performance of pre-service, beginning, or professional-level teachers, although numerous proposals have been made by SBE. Accountability for ensuring teacher quality is largely a local rather than a state responsibility, resting with individual colleges of education or local school districts.

Washington's long tradition of local control has influenced policy choices. There has been limited interest in strong state oversight for teacher preparation and development. However, education reform represents a new level of state involvement in education. The state has set high expectations for improved student learning. If the state wants to ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills to help students meet the new academic standards, it could also consider a new level of involvement in teacher preparation and development.

Statewide Standards

- Consistent statewide standards of performance for teachers could be developed, with benchmarks for the stages of a teacher's career. The standards could be developed with statewide participation of teachers, higher education faculty, school district personnel, and the public.
- The standards could then be used in all pre-service programs, beginning teacher assistance programs, principals' evaluations of teachers, and professional certificate programs.
- The statutory criteria for principals' evaluations of teachers could align with the new statewide performance standards. (Requires legislative action.)

Statewide Performance Assessments

- All future teachers could take a statewide basic skills test prior to entry into pre-service programs. All teacher candidates could be assessed for content knowledge, and possibly pedagogy, prior to receiving a residency certificate to begin teaching. (Requires legislative action.)
- Beginning teacher assistance programs should incorporate informal performance assessments to encourage beginning teachers and their mentors to work on building knowledge and skills.
- Additional steps could be taken to ensure that performance assessments for professional certification are consistent and fair across certificate programs. Alternatively, a state-administered assessment process could be considered.

Accountability

- There could be clear and explicit criteria to determine that pre-service and professional certificate programs meet state standards for program approval, including periodic follow-up and review of programs and candidate performance. Positive impact on student learning could be clearly defined to ensure it is measured in a consistent way across candidates and programs.
- State funding for beginning teacher assistance programs could be conditioned on a program's use of performance standards and informal performance assessments. State funding for TAP could cover all beginning teachers.
- Issues such as relevance, fairness, and statewide feasibility could be addressed in state approval of professional certificate programs. Alternatively, a state-administered assessment process could be considered.